Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis: Above All, an Eternal Image

By Chris Chase

NEW YORK

Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy Onassis died Thursday. Outside her Fifth Avenue apartment strangers gathered, strewed rose petals, lit candles. She was 64 and she had been a role model for thousands of women. She was loved by people she didn't know and who didn't know her. What they responded to was the image she presented. She was smart, brave, complicated and, one suspects, she understood that it was all—politics and fashion, Camelot and the pill-box hat—about image.

From the beginning the ambitious, beautiful newspaper woman who could speak perfect French and the ambitious, dashing, young senator who wanted to be President were a match out of central casting. No one who saw pictures of them on a state visit to France ever forgot the dazzling vision of Jackie in a white gown with her dark hair swept up. Even Gen. Charles DeGaulle, that fierce and austere war hero, melted when she smiled.

But scratch the surface and there was pain. John F. Kennedy was a womanizer, he suffered from Addison's disease, he left his wife alone too much. Jackie was a spendthrift whose clothing bills were so huge they infuriated her millionaire husband. Yet together, he and she brightened the world.

In public, Mrs. Kennedy played her part in the pageant and what she felt in her heart, we never knew. Maybe it was none of our business. She was so good at what she did, the facade was enough. She gave citizens the White House tour, she issued invitations to dancers and classical musicians. She was so well bred, so elegant, such a magical creature that when she was pictured crawling in apparent terror on the back of the convertible after her husband's murder, we were shocked. You might have done it, I might have done it, but Jacqueline Kennedy never seemed that weakly human.

More icon than flesh, she saw us through our immense national tragedy with a dignity few of us had ever before observed. We were suffering not only loss but shame that this had happened in the United States. Many credited her with giving us back our national pride. For she staged-managed her husband's funeral—the eternal flame at the grave, the procession of world leaders walking behind the casket, the riderless horse, the little boy saluting his slain father. She was determined that John F. Kennedy's martyrdom should echo Abraham Lincoln's. And while nobody could sensibly equate Lincoln, who's job was done, with Kennedy, whose job was just beginning, the country attempting to heal itself needed the sense of ritual she imposed on those terrible days.

Even the myth of Camelot was just that, a myth. Yet her use of it was effective. There never was a Camelot, it wasn't history it was a fictional rendering of a court ruled over by a fictional king and while Mrs. Kennedy's Camelot was an idealized projection—a public-relations selling job if you want to be crude about it—it was one we gratefully embraced. She tried to censor books that said anything she didn't want said about the thousand days Kennedy had governed the country and her perfect manners masked an iron will. Even so, we appreciated that strength and her pride and her mystery.

Some turned against her when she married Aristotle Onassis. People said he

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Chris Chase is the co-author of "Josephine: The Hungry Heart" (Random House), a biography of Josephine Baker.

That Instinctive, Enigmatic Aplomb

By Tom Christie

People no longer came up to Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis on the street and asked impertinent questions, said society columnist Liz Smith last Thursday night. And if they did, said Smith, Jackie "just smiled and went on her way." She had finally become what she had perhaps always wanted to be: a famous, *private* person.

She had managed it by learning to handle people and the press like no one else ever has—silently. Her dictum to her secretary ("My press relations will be minimum information given with maximum politeness.") had been reduced even more, to a brief, enigmatic smile.

It hadn't always been so easy. At the

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Tom Christie is a contributing editor and columnist for Buzz magazine.

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was crude and cared only for power and celebrities and had caught the biggest celebrity in the world. People suddenly saw her as all style and no substance and said she loved money and had caught one of the richest men in the world. But when the marriage failed and he died, and she came back to us, all was forgiven.

Whether or not she considered herself a symbol we made her into one. Her children turned out well, she went to work though she had the means to be perfectly useless. She protected her privacy and we respected that. But because she so seldom spoke to us, because we so seldom heard her voice, because we never really knew her, we made her into whatever we wanted or needed her to be.

She was a genius at managing her image. She dealt with the press better than any movie star, though she appeared on no talk shows and gave few interviews. Despite this reserve, more people wanted to know about her than wanted to know about Elizabeth Taylor or the Princess of Wales.

For the most part, we saw her in ways she wanted to be seen. It was enough. □

Onassis

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Democratic National Convention in 1956, Jacqueline Kennedy was sitting in the Kennedy box when a reporter approached her. At the word "newspaper," Jackie jumped up, left the box and headed across the convention floor. The reporter followed. She ducked down a hallway leading to a garage. The reporter kept after her. She hiked up her skirt, broke into a run and disappeared. Four years later, there was nowhere to disappear to: At age 31, she was the First Lady. Nancy Reagan says that nothing—in her case, not the years in Hollywood and in the California governor's mansion combined—can prepare one for the absolute crush of public/media interest in those who inhabit the White House. And Nancy Reagan was no Jackie Kennedy.

This was the woman who so impressed the French on a state visit that John F. Kennedy said, "I don't think it impertinent to introduce myself; I'm the man who accompanied Jacqueline Kennedy to Paris." This was the woman who, after giving speeches in Spanish in Latin America, caused Che Guevara to say that she was the only American woman he wanted to meet—and he didn't want it to be at a conference table. This was the woman who received, on average, 10 press requests a day for her shoe size.

This was also the woman who feuded constantly with the intrusive press, particularly when her children's privacy was concerned. (Even her husband waited until she was out of the country to arrange the now-famous photographs of Caroline and John Jr. under his desk.)

This, on the other hand, was the woman who directed the greatest theatrical event in modern history—Kennedy's funeral. She more than anyone seemed to instinctively understand that, in terms of the collective consciousness if not politics, the assassination left the world not with Lyndon B. Johnson but with Jackie, Caroline and John-John. This was the moment that her and the kids' lives were unquestionably, importantly public. This was history and healing combined, for family and country.

She single-handedly created an entire portfolio in America's iconic imagery: standing beside Johnson as he was sworn in; walking behind the horse-drawn coffin and between the two brothers; she and Caroline kneeling before and kissing the flag-draped coffin; John-John saluting his father one last time, and finally, her own veiled grace cracking over the grave.

On a basic level, we liked looking at Onassis. She was stunning and, even at her worst, photographed well. Among the panoply of images moving across our TV screens since her death were some that took our breath away. Her nature, her silence, was such that we could never get enough of her. We were always left yearning for more. A novelist once told me he never fully describes his female characters physically, because readers like to fill in the blanks. Onassis was like that, only she was the visual counterpart, and we were always filling in her words, her thoughts. She was what we wanted, who we hoped she would be.

There were, of course, things we knew—or thought we knew—about her, things we liked and disliked, sometimes simultaneously. With an instinctive aplomb and grace, mixed with a willful independence, she consistently defied expectations—official and otherwise. Early on in the White House years, she boasted to a friend, "People told me 99 things I had to do as First Lady—and I haven't done one of them."

One of them was cooperating with the press. Jackie not only didn't cooperate, she didn't care. She skipped a press luncheon once, feigning illness, and spent the afternoon touring the National Gallery with the novelist Andre Malraux, then France's minister of culture. So she irritated a few reporters. So what? In the end, she spent the afternoon with Malraux, and they didn't.

That enigmatic smile? Now you know.□